

The Secret

BY FORREST CRISSEY

HESTER was bending over the bed of lilies-of-the-valley, in the cool corner where the ell and the upright joined, when the hand she outstretched toward the sprays of delicate white bells stopped short, arrested by the sound of light feet scurrying over the gravel walk.

Yes; they had run away from her again—Nell and Kate Wyckoff and Belle Kramer.

It was no new thing for Hester to be left in the lurch by her sister and her sister's chums; but this time it hurt with a new sting, an unaccustomed sense of cruelty that made her stiffen, catch her breath, and retreat to her favorite spot in the back yard of The Jungle.

This name had been bestowed upon the old Dart place by other inhabitants of Maple Avenue—the one strictly “aristocratic” street of Strawberry Point. They considered its wood-colored Gothic house and its unkempt yard a reproach to their own smartly shorn lawns and their neat “residences” shining in fresh coats of cottage colors. And the shaggy woodiness of this unmowed, untrimmed thicket of grass, shrubbery, and close-set trees stood out in rebellious conspicuousness because it lay between the banker's snug lawn and the General Farnsworth place—the one as brightly new as a piece of French plate, the other a splendid old landmark as rich and soft to the eye as a breadth of antique damask.

Only a low hedge drew a dividing line between The Jungle and the General Farnsworth place, and Hester's retreat was between the clumps of lilacs, just at the little break in the hedge. She had chosen the spot and made it her own by right of pre-emption because the bushes shut off the view from the house and because the yard dipped cozily a little short of these, thus adding to the seclusion of the vernal shelter into which she withdrew when the world pressed her too heavily. And now she knew that the hour

of her desolation had come: Nell had grown up, and had cut her off.

With the pained eagerness of a sufferer reaching for a familiar remedy, the hands of Hester quickly lifted the scrap of carpet that draped the front of a weather-beaten box, drew forth a doll and hugged it impetuously to the breast of her white frock. At first her tightened lips twitched and quivered, the mist in her brown eyes threatened to precipitate into tears, and she swallowed with nervous resoluteness. There was just a brief moment when an outburst of grief was imminent—then the dew on her long, curling lashes distilled, a brave control touched her drawn lips, and she impetuously confessed to the bisque infant at her breast:

“It never did hurt so before, never!”

Gradually a dusk of dreams crept into her great, dark eyes, and she stared abstractedly at the pigeons preening themselves on the ridge-pole of the banker's barn.

“I guess it's because I'm getting so much older,” she said aloud, arousing from her abstraction. Her fingers strayed caressingly over the smooth, tinted cheek of her doll, and she continued: “Anyhow, I'll never, never treat you that way. You wouldn't like to be run away from—I should say not! And you won't be, either—never! *never!* NEVER! When you grow up there'll be somebody to know how it feels and to understand that ‘little’ girls can want to go to picnics an' things as much as girls that have just let down their dresses, an' that giggle and whisper about boys an' . . .”

But Hester's assertive motherings suddenly ended in a startled “Oh!”—and she found herself looking up into the azure, smiling eyes of a young woman who stood hesitatingly in the gap of the hedge, holding up the skirt of a flowing morning dress of wonderful fabric and fashion. Hester's cheeks flamed scarlet: she had been caught playing with a doll—and what girlish shame is quite equal to that

of being discovered "doll playing" after one has passed that mysterious meridian of adolescence charted as "too old for dolls"? Now her childish weakness was blazoned before the eyes of *Mrs. Jack Dowling!*

Mrs. Jack Dowling? A princess is a poor figure by which to suggest the dizzy altitude of distinction that this name marked in the feminine world of Strawberry Point. The mere fact—as Hester well knew—that Mrs. Jack Dowling had been seen to pause on the street and turn for a backward glance at Irma Dillingham had been enough to crown the store-keeper's classic-featured young girl as the undisputed "Beauty" of the Point.

The daughter of an earl who had disappeared as a child and had finally returned in the blush of radiant young womanhood to restore the ancestral estate to its ancient glory, would have been a dull and lusterless being in the eyes of a devoted tenantry by comparison with the only daughter of "the General" as seen through the dazzled vision of the women of Strawberry Point. In her confusion Hester did not even think of fleeing, but sat quivering, inert, bereft of all volition.

And then she heard a voice exquisitely soft, gentle, eager, saying:

"Oh, she has lovely dark eyes just like yours! I wish I had my Doris here—perhaps you'd let me come over and play with you? I'd so love to! I'll tell you a secret: sometimes I lock my door and get out all my doll things and, down on the floor, where nobody can see, I have a perfectly splendid time. Isn't it stupid of folks to think that just because one's grown up a little—and perhaps wears long dresses and is married—that it's a shame to play with dolls? If you'd wait, and would like to have me"—her voice was almost pleading—"I'd run back to the house and get my Doris, and we could have just a beautiful time here."

In her amazement Hester could only smile shyly and nod her head. But as her princess made dainty haste across the arched rustic bridge and up the billowing lawn toward the Great House she gave the stoic Isabel Marie a hug calculated to start the sawdust from her seams, and exclaimed:

"Isn't she heavenly! Oh, I just love

her! What if I'd gone to the picnic and missed— Oh, I can't think of it!"

The lilac nook of The Jungle had never known such an hour of ecstatic bliss for Hester as that in which she and the runaway mistress of the Great House exchanged maternal chatter, held a grand reception, organized a mothers' club, and finally planned, with delicious detail, what they would do at their next clandestine meeting.

"And remember," cautioned the Princess, who had somehow transformed into the Playmate, "that nobody must know. I'd be in awful disgrace, and people would talk if they knew. Of course I *may* tell my husband when he comes back from his cruise to see me—he's such a nice boy, and *he understands*. If he's very good, maybe we'll sometime let him play with us—but not unless you want him."

And when the young and lovely mistress of the Great House reached her room she wrote a letter to Lieutenant Jack Dowling, on a far-away battle-ship, that said:

"I've found the most adorable little playmate, with dark, dream-haunted eyes and the heart of a Madonna! She is half child, half woman, and her smile is a thing to warm frozen hearts."

As Hester slowly arranged Isabel Marie in her bed and drew down flaps of carpet, her ardent heart was filled with a rare and almost supernal glory. The daughter of the General, the mistress of the Great House, was her playmate! What story, of all she had ever heard or read, could compare with this wonderful thing that had happened to her—Hester Elizabeth Dart—and at the very moment when Nell and Kate and Belle had given her the cruelest cut that she had yet known? They couldn't hurt her any more; she was sure of that! Now she was clad in an invisible coat of mail that could turn the point of any lance of desertion, neglect, or superiority that they might hurl against her. To be deserted now and "given the slip" would be only a passport to secret joys which, were they known to her deserters, would transform the "Little Tagtail" into a being envied beyond anybody in Strawberry Point—yes, or in the whole world!

And soon she realized that her secret



Drawn by John Alonzo Williams

SHE HAD BEEN CAUGHT PLAYING WITH A DOLL

joy was constantly to be fed by hands that knew not what satisfying meat they offered. In the millinery shop that very evening, as her mother was "trying on," she heard Mrs. Gray, the banker's wife, say to Mrs. Dillingham, who was buying special roses for Irma's second-best hat:

"I'm just *dying* for a look into the General's house, aren't you? Richard was told that the new furnishings alone cost ten thousand dollars. And goodness only knows what the decorations and the new sun-room over the library have cost! They've simply poured money into that old house."

"Yes," responded Mrs. Dillingham, "they certainly are enormously rich. I heard that the General's mine turns out *three thousand dollars a day*. But I do wish that Mrs. Jack Dowling wasn't quite so exclusive. So far as I know, there isn't a woman in Strawberry Point that she's spoken to since she came back—not one!"

"It seems hardly human," returned the banker's wife, "for a young woman to shut herself away so—even if she has been brought up abroad and is used to titled society. I caught sight of her face the other day as she was driving past in her car, and I must say that I thought her *lovely*. I couldn't believe that a woman with that sort of a face would be snobbish or stuck up."

"Well," remarked Mrs. Dillingham, as she drew on her gloves, "there are some women in Strawberry Point that pretend they're not interested in whether Mrs. Jack Dowling calls on them or not; but they're the very ones that rush to the window every time they hear an automobile. They'd lie down in the street and let Barbara Dowling drive right over them if she'd only ring their door-bells!"

And as Mrs. Dillingham passed out the door the banker's wife laughed and commented:

"And I'm not sure but Julia Dillingham would. For my part, I'm quite crazy about her. Richard says that he doesn't believe that the duchess whose picture you saw in the same Sunday supplement that had the likeness of 'Young Mrs. Jack Dowling, the American Beauty, the Chum of the Duchess,' could turn a town topsy-turvy in the way that the old General's daughter has. But I tell him

that a young woman with all her wealth and brains and beauty who has made London and Paris and New York take notice can do most anything with Strawberry Point."

And Hester, picking up scraps about the trimming-table, listened with a glowing and secret joy that she could not wholly keep from her earnest face. Her mother's hand reached out and smoothed back the loose coils of black hair that swung forward about her face as she stooped.

"Child," said the tired milliner, "your eyes are very bright,—is anything—"

But the entry of a customer left the question unfinished, and Hester peacefully pursued her dreams of what Mrs. Gray and Mrs. Dillingham would have said if she had told them that the Princess of Strawberry Point was her playmate—her dearest and only "chum."

"I don't believe," Hester mused, "that she ever played dolls with that duchess." At times, when Nell and her friends whispered importantly and moved on if she came near them, Hester longed to let them know how pitifully small were their petty secrets and to tell them:

"Stand by the lilacs Saturday morning, at ten, and *see my Secret!*"

And although her loyal lips instinctively closed tight at such times of temptation to "tell," she was not denied the joy of thinking what they would say. A hundred times, by the eye of imagination, she had watched the confusion of their faces as they peered in amazement from behind the bushes and heard Mrs. Jack Dowling, with dainty Parisian Doris in her arms, exclaim:

"Now, Playmate, let's have the best time ever! Do you know it seems an age since last Saturday—but I've watched you pass each day, dear!"

As Mrs. Dart was absently serving the cereal one Saturday morning and mentally retrimming Mrs. Gray's "shape," Nell, whose seat at the table commanded a view of the street, suddenly exclaimed:

"Mother! There comes the Farnsworths' butler. Do you suppose he *can* be coming here?" Then, gliding into the front hall, she called back, in penetrating undertones:

"He *is*! He's turned in at the gate. What do you suppose *can* be the mat-



ONE GLANCE AT THE CARD SENT THE BLOOD IN GLAD BOUNDS TO HER VERY FINGER-TIPS

ter? Maybe Mrs. Jack Dowling wants you to do work for her? Mother! That would be the greatest luck you've ever had."

"Hi'm to wait for a hanswer, miss," said the stout, red-faced butler, standing very stiff and looking several sizes too large for his clothes, as he handed out a small, corn-tiuted envelope bearing the Dowling monogram.

"Why," exclaimed Mrs. Dart, "this is addressed to *Hester*!"

"I wonder what she can have *done*!" exclaimed Nell, sinking tragically into a chair. "Here, let me open it. He's waiting."

"It's Hester's," was the quiet answer; and the eager, trembling hands of the least member of the family received the unopened note.

For one brief instant there was a lurking fear in the heart of Hester that "something had happened" to break the blissful perfection of her secret. But one glance at the dainty square card and its clear, bold writing sent the blood in glad bounds to her very finger-tips.

Peering over her shoulder, the sister in her first let-down skirt read aloud:

"Mrs. John Stanley Dowling desires the pleasure of Miss Hester Elizabeth Dart's presence at one o'clock luncheon this sixth day of September."

There was a choke in the voice of the neglected sister as she paused a moment. Then she caught wildly at the one remaining straw of hope.

"Look inside again, Hess. There may be another there—oh, joy! There is! There is! There is! Read it quick."

From the smaller envelope Hester drew forth another card. Silently Nell read:

"DEAREST PLAYMATE.—Please come—and stay all day. We shall be quite alone. Have you forgotten that this is your birthday? Send word by Bagot. I shall expect you not later than twelve.

"BARBARA."

An unprecedented dumbness fell upon the elder daughter of the widow Dart's

household. She stared across her plate with the dull, uncomprehending eyes of one who has received a blow.

Mrs. Dart arose with decision, went to the front door, and said to the waiting butler:

"Please say to Mrs. Dowling that Hester is glad to accept her invitation."

Then, as she returned to the breakfast-table, she murmured:

"Mrs. Jack Dowling!"

Her faded, widowed eyes suddenly sparkled with a show of the spirit that had once made her known as the liveliest girl in Red Oaks, and she smiled as she thought: "The first social function given by 'the Princess of Strawberry Point,' a birthday luncheon to Miss Hester Elizabeth Dart, of The Jungle!" Then to Hester she said:

"And how long has my little girl been moving in the society of Mrs. Jack Dowling, who could have been a countess or anything like that if she'd been a mind to?"

"Isn't it splendid?" answered Hester, with a quick glance at her staring sister. "It all began the very day when Nell and the girls ran off to the picnic and left me. You don't know how lovely and beautiful and—"

"But you must get ready," suddenly interrupted the mother. "I've simply got to go to the shop; Mrs. Gray is coming for her hat this afternoon. Nell will help you dress. If she doesn't she will be among those missing from Kate Wyckoff's party! Have her do your hair simply, just as you always wear it for church—no foolishness or frills! And put on your new muslin; that's neat and simple."

"Have her do your hair!" Was triumph ever more exquisite?

As Mrs. Dart went out the door she smiled at what the banker's wife would say at the incidental statement that: "My Hester is taking luncheon to-day with Mrs. Jack Dowling. Yes; they're great friends. Why, Mrs. Dowling calls Hester 'my little playmate.'"

The eager, humble, almost worshipful solicitude of her helper was eloquent of the abjectness of Nell's defeat; but the shining face of the one-time "Little Tag-tail" held no hint of any thought save of the wonderful joy that had come to her. Even the white, slender little arms that

flashed and arched to her head as she combed her dark, shining hair seemed vibrant with a song of happiness. When the last touch had been given to the toilet of the guest of honor, her servitor stood back and exclaimed:

"There, Hess! You do look nice, and not fussy, either. It's almost twelve, now, and you'd better be going. I can at least watch you from the window."

But the elect of the gods did not turn back to see that the face of her former oppressor was suddenly withdrawn from the bow-window—withdrawn to suffer a teary burial against the sofa pillow. Hester's face was set toward Paradise, toward her Princess, her incomparable Playmate; and her demure feet might have been treading the blue cloud over the eastern hills beyond the Great House, so far as conscious contact with the earth was concerned. Oh, it was good to be so happy, to have such a wonderful secret!

Suddenly she stopped short, just at the beginning of the Farnsworth wall—that low, vine-grown wall that had held so many village lovers. Secret? *Her secret was gone!* Mother knew it, Nell knew it, and by night everybody in the Point would know it. What if every girl, maid, and woman in the whole town would look at her with envious eyes—*her secret was gone*—that precious thing that she and her Princess-Playmate had held between them in happy concealment from the whole deprived world had somehow slipped from her grasp! Her jewel had been suddenly struck from her hand and a strange new loneliness gripped her.

"I don't know what I'll do now," she whispered to herself.

Perhaps she would again have fled to the lilac nook and Isabel Marie—but that instant she caught the assuring flash of a handkerchief at an upper window of the Great House.

Anyhow, she would still have her Playmate, her Princess!

As she passed hesitatingly between the heavy pillars of the stone gateway and walked slowly toward the Great House she was glad that she had seen the friendly flutter of that signal at the upper window, for the house suddenly came to seem very great, almost like a palace or a castle—and she herself felt exceeding small. The heavy, carved doors appeared

to be looking frowningly down upon her through their panels of beveled plate. But her feet had hardly touched the top step before the door swung open and the bowing Bagot was saying:

"Come right hin, Miss 'Ester. Right hin! Hi'll show you hup to th' mistress."

Then from the landing of the great stairway came the voice of comradeship calling:

"Hello, Playmate!"—and the next instant she was being kissed by the Princess:

"One for each year, you know—and one to grow on!"

Hand in hand they wandered away into the conservatory, and there the Princess picked a few white, starry flowers and set them in the dark hair of her small playmate—whose eyes seemed to ask: "Is it a real Princess? Is it Strawberry Point?"

When they were back again in the white-and-blue chamber from which they had started, the Princess placed in Hester's astonished hands a small jewel-box.

"Open it, dear; it's for you. I bought it in Florence before I had found my Playmate, but the corals will go perfectly with your coloring. And the locket was made just for you. Let me put it on you for the first time!"

And then Hester stood very straight and slender and still—except for the wild, happy beating of her heart that shook the breast of her white frock—while the Princess looped coil after coil of the pink chain about her throat and then opened the locket that held an exquisite miniature of the giver. And there, upon the smooth concave disk of gold that closed down over the softly brilliant face when the locket was snapped shut were the words:

HESTER

FROM HER PLAYMATE

B. F. D.

"I shall never take it off," whispered Hester, "not even when I bathe. I can be very careful. Mother has never taken off her wedding-ring—not once."



SHE TOOK COUNT OF THE WONDERS IN WHICH AT THAT MOMENT SHE WAS LIVING

"I'm afraid you'll have a hard time to manage it," laughed Playmate, "but it will be just the same if you can't. And now I hear Bagot coming to tell us that luncheon is ready."

There was a quick clutching of the

mellow strokes. Hushed and quivering, Hester sat tensely erect in the high, carved chair that somehow slid noiselessly into place to receive her, under the deft guidance of Bagot.

Swiftly Hester's eager heart took count

of the wonders of that day: the invitation, the transformation of Nell, the necklace and the locket, the birthday cake, and the enchantments of the scene in which she—Hester Elizabeth Dart—was at that moment living! But in this supreme instant a sudden and perverse shadow fell upon the rapt face of the guest of honor.

"And what," asked the Princess, as she tilted the chocolate-pot, "is my Playmate thinking about just now?"

"I—we," she shyly stammered—"we haven't any secret any more."

But just then Bagot pushed open the swinging door and advanced with neatly balanced tray, and the mistress made no answer, but her eyes flashed a quick, comprehensive glance.

After the birthday feast was over, the Playmates explored the Great House with a searching abandon that did not stop at closets or even the fragrant cedar ward-



SHE HEARD THE "GREATEST SECRET OF ALL"

robe hung with orderly rows of gowns that made Hester's eyes leap with wonder. And in her wise little heart she knew that there was almost no price that the banker's wife or Mrs. Dillingham or any other of her mother's best customers would not have paid for the privilege of being shown the draped and dazzling mysteries of that cedar room. But, when the Princess had hung the last lacy creation back in its place, she saw that the shadow still lingered hauntingly in the

hand that Hester had given to the Princess as they entered the darkened dining-room, and she saw in the center of the round table the snowy birthday cake bristling and splendid with its bright array of candles—their reflected flames flashing and gleaming from the polished sides of the silver service. And everywhere were flowers and fragile creeping vines. Somewhere in the soft, fragrant, shadowy depths of the room, a clock was ticking away the seconds with stately,

depths of the loving eyes that looked so like the twin pools that she and the Nice Boy had once found in the Black Forest.

"There's nothing else to see, Playmate," said the Princess, "excepting the sun-room. Shall we go there?"

"Yes," was the quiet answer. "I never saw a sun-room." And as the door was pushed open and they walked into the bright, alluring space, Hester exclaimed:

"Oh, isn't it dear and clean and sweet! It's such a happy-looking place!"

"Yes," responded the Princess, with a strange little note of seriousness in her voice. "I expect to be very happy here. No one has ever been in it excepting the maid since it was done, until now."

And then the Princess, with a quick, startled movement, swept a tiny thing of sheer white cloth from the little reedwork table and whisked it deftly into the tall standing basket.

It was very still in the sun-room with Hester standing silently by the big palm looking out toward the east as steadfastly as an Arab who hears the sound of the muezzin from the distant mosque—the Princess leaning back in the woven chair, her perplexed eyes studying the slender, virginal figure before her. But as one of the white blossoms loosened from Hester's hair and fell to the floor, she heard the low voice of the Princess calling:

"Playmate—dear."

When Hester turned she was beckoned to a seat on the wide arm of the woven chair, and there, with the soft, beautiful hand of the Princess coiling and uncoiling her hair, she heard the "greatest secret of all"—heard it in the sweet chosen words in which only her Princess could tell it!

The broad coping of the old wall was cushioned with snow and the pines along the driveway looked like giant Christmas trees when Bagot came out of the Great House and hastened toward the gate into The Jungle at a most unbutleresque pace, puffing laboriously into the frosty air at every stride. As Mrs. Dart admitted him by the front door he seemed to fill the narrow hall with repressed and swelling importance. The mask of impersonal and polite attentiveness that had always seemed to be his face was gone. He was,

for the moment, forgetfully human—like a big boy bursting with stupendous news. Then, suddenly, he recovered himself, bowed to the eager-eyed Hester, and delivered his historic greeting:

"Th' mistress sends 'er best compliments to Miss 'Ester, and will she come and see the heir of th' 'ouse? 'E's a fine, stout man babby as hi ever looked hon—'e his! 'Is Grace th' young Juke of Battersea wasn't th' babby that my mistress 'as got. 'E wasn't—that. And hi hought to know—has 'eld 'inn hout to 'is Grace as his dead now. Ah, 'e's got a heye like my lady's hown—an' legs to set a 'orse with!"

Hester darted up the stairs to her room, and Bagot, lowering his voice, confided to Mrs. Dart and the subdued Nellie:

"The General, 'e's stalled him the mountains, and th' marster 'e's hon the 'igh seas—and hit's hup t' 'er she calls Playmate t' do th' honors. But she's hequal to it. My heyes, but th' lady does dote hon Miss 'Ester!"

"Mrs. Jack Dowling—a baby!" exclaimed the astounded Nellie. "Why, ma, I haven't heard a syllable so much as whispered! There isn't a woman in the Point that—"

"That explains—" began Mrs. Dart. But she suddenly remembered the presence of Bagot and stopped abruptly.

The lips of Hester, who had returned unnoticed and stood in the hall door, twitched with the hint of a smile.

"Oh, I've known it for months," she quietly remarked, in an obviously incidental tone—and then opened the outer door for Bagot, who lightly touched the shoulder of her scarlet coat and chuckled:

"Quite right, miss. Hit's little that the mistress 'ides from 'er Playmate. You're th' happle of 'er heye!"

After Hester had gazed long and adoringly at the tiny, squirming human mite that blinked wonderingly from its soft nest in the bassinette, she drew from under her coat the carefully attired Isabel Marie and shyly deposited that incomparable treasure on the bed beside the young mother.

"But, Playmate!" exclaimed the pale Princess. "you mustn't give her up. You'll want—"

"Oh no!" came the eager protest. "Why, you—you see *we're* got *him* now!"